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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: RELEASED ISLAMIC LEADER ATTACKS GOA LEGITIMACY,
WORRYING THE PUBLIC AND POSING HARD CHOICE FOR AUTHORITIES

REF: ALGIERS 565

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) Since his March 6 release from prison pursuant to the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, Ali Belhadj, co-founder of the now banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), has blatantly defied the Charter's ban on those released engaging in political activity. Belhadj's most direct challenge came in an April 3 interview with the French daily Le Monde. In that interview, he sharply attacked the Algerian government, calling it illegitimate, labeling President Bouteflika a mere tool of the armed forces, and dismissing the referendum on the Charter as rigged and the Charter itself as having "no constitutional legitimacy." Belhadj also called for an Islamic Republic in Algeria, clearly pushing the envelope and testing the limits of GOA tolerance. Reaction to Belhadj's political broadside has been muted from all sides, reflecting, we believe, not apathy, but a sober appreciation of the stakes of mishandling this challenge to a government and society emerging from a decade of terrorism and religious civil war. The government has gingerly repeated earlier warnings that the Charter restrictions would be enforced but has so far avoided tougher action, suggesting it wants to avoid making Belhadj a cause celebre and boosting support for him as an authentic voice of opposition. Politicos and political parties have similarly low-keyed the issue in their public statements. And the press, mindful of being used as a platform for transmitting Belhadj's radical message, has consciously sought to keep the public informed, while not dramatizing the story, not using it to press its own criticisms of the government, and, with a couple of exceptions, not even printing his picture.

2. (C) Privately, however, reaction among the middle classes, and especially civil society, has been one of deepening concern that the Charter, by permitting the release of individuals with blood on their hands without requiring an admission of responsibility or even a request for pardon, has been a serious mistake and has given renewed confidence to former FIS elements to press their radical agenda more assertively. There is also concern that the government has gotten itself into a difficult situation with the Charter, risking building support for Islamists if they re-arrest Belhadj, or completely undermining the Charter's ban on political activity if they don't. Views among our contacts vary widely as to how much resonance Belhadj's radical Islamic message will have among Algeria's underclass

following over a decade of terrorism. Many say you can fool the people once, but not twice. Others, including two former ministers, think the FIS could win an election now if one were held, given that the lower classes have still seen little or no visible improvement in their living conditions. Where everyone agrees is that the key to defusing the problem is faster and more visible progress in addressing urgent unemployment and housing grievances, which feed discontent and receptivity to radical critiques. (End Summary and Comment.)

BELHADJ BLASTS ILLEGITIMACY OF GOA IN LE MONDE INTERVIEW

13. (U) In his deliberately provocative April 3 interview with Le Monde, Belhadj launched a broadside attack against the Algerian government and its leaders, in clear defiance of the National Reconciliation Charter's ban on political activity by those released under the terms of the Charter. "Nobody -- neither the president, nor the military decision-makers -- can forbid me from engaging in politics!", he declared. "The government has been illegitimate ever since the 1992 coup d'etat. Political pluralism does not exist and has never existed in Algeria. How is it possible to argue the contrary, when the choice of head of state is made by the army chiefs?" He also lambasted the Charter as having no institutional legitimacy: "How can people dare to talk about national reconciliation when we have lived in a state of emergency for the past 14 years? A real reconciliation must be negotiated among all parties concerned....(here) it is imposed by those responsible for the coup d'etat and them alone. The oppressors portray themselves as victims." When reminded by the interviewer that the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation was approved by a strong majority,

Belhadj responded that the vote was rigged and the government scorned and betrayed the Algerian people.

14. (U) Asked if he was responsible for the national tragedy of the 1990's, Belhadj said he could not reply "yes" or "no," adding that the Algerian judiciary needed to shed light on the tragedy in order to determine everyone's responsibility. He remarked that he continued to struggle for an Islamic Algerian state, governed by the Qur'an. "Since we are a Muslim people, there can be no inconsistencies as in the West." Commenting on the conversion of Algerians to other faiths, he said that those who convert Muslims are "...interfering in the country's affairs. They are spies, secret agents."

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC REACTION

15. (SBU) The Algerian written press, having matured since the 1990's, has not tried to hype Belhadj's comments or, as in the past, allowed itself to be used as a vehicle for spreading his radical message or advancing its own criticisms of the government. Instead, editorials and commentaries are explicitly discussing the need to find the right balance between informing the public and not being used by violent extremists to undermine the state. Except in a few instances, the newspapers have refrained from publishing his picture. (Note: All Algerian broadcast media are owned and operated by the GOA and have not covered Belhadj at all.)

16. (C) Public reaction and debate over the implications of the Belhadj's broadside against the legitimacy of the current authorities has been surprisingly muted. Government statements have been limited to low-key declarations that the Charter would be enforced; party officials have been quiet; and civil society leaders have not spoken out publicly. Beneath this muted reaction, however, there in fact has been widespread anxiety over recent developments, the increasing confidence of Islamists to push the political envelope, renewed calls for resurrecting the banned FIS party, and the government's under-reaction to blatant provocations. At a

recent lunch of senior civil society types, everyone one of them privately expressed serious concern to the Ambassador about Belhadj and other Islamists' increasing activism, the government's slowness in opening up politically and economically, and the dangers that Belhadj's radical message could have some resonance among former FIS supporters who, though not radical themselves, have not seen any real change in their living conditions, despite the increasing wealth in government coffers. While there have been widely varying views among our contacts as to how much resonance a radical Islamic message will have among Algeria's underclass following more than a decade of terrorism, two former ministers told the Ambassador this week that if an election were held now and the FIS could run, it would win a majority in a protest vote. Counterbalancing this, one of these ministers professed himself optimistic that the situation would sort itself out, and other contacts have maintained that the Algerians, having been duped by the Islamist message once before, would not fall for it a second time. The key to defusing the problem, virtually all contacts have said, was faster progress in addressing urgent unemployment and housing needs, which fed discontent and receptivity to radical arguments about the illegitimacy of the government.

GOA DILEMMA

17. (C) Despite its experience in countering terrorism and combating extremist messages, the GOA faces a dilemma. In late March, in response to public statements by other prominent released prisoners, Prime Minister Ouyahia, President Bouteflika and Interior Minister Zerhouni pointedly reminded the nation that the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation placed limits on the political activity of those released under the terms of the Charter and would be enforced. To date, the only public response to Belhadj's defiant April 3 interview has been an April 8 statement by Justice Minister Belaiz reminding that "all persons who violate the law...Belhadj or others" will be held accountable under the Charter's provisions. The lack of any overt move to date against Belhadj suggests the GOA leadership is weighing whether re-arresting Belhadj would help enforce the ban on political activity by released terrorists, or only make Belhadj a martyr, widening his support and compounding

the problem. While this could quickly change, for now the GOA has opted for a cautious approach, issuing warnings but taking no real action. The dilemma for the GOA, of course, is that non-action in the face of deliberate defiance of the Charter's provisions risks undermining its restrictive provisions altogether, proving Belhadj right that the GOA cannot forbid him from engaging in politics, and opening the door to more radical discourse from those who see their release, not as a pardon for terrorist acts, but as vindication of the justice of their cause and as another phase in the struggle for the establishment of an Islamic Republic.

ERDMAN